Open Dialogue peer review:
A response to Hartley

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In his article, 'Reflections on 50 years of teaching psychology', James Hartley concludes that the teaching of psychology has changed relatively little over the past several decades. As someone whose teaching career covered a very similar time period, I agree in general terms with that assessment. In this article, however, I focus on some of the major changes (good and bad) that have occurred since the 1960s. Finally, a few suggestions for the future are made.

Personal history

IT WAS FASCINATING FOR ME to read Hartley's article in part because our academic careers spanned a similar period of time. I was an undergraduate student in a class of 30 students at University College London between 1962 and 1965, whereas he was a student at Durham University between 1958 and 1961. I then became an assistant lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck College in the University of London in 1965, just one year after Hartley became an assistant lecturer at Keele University. After that, I moved to Royal Holloway in the University of London in 1987 and to Roehampton University in 2010.

It was reassuring to discover that his experiences were very similar to my own. For example, there was considerable emphasis on 'finals' back in the 1960s, tutorial groups increased progressively in size as the years went by, the range of assessment methods increased over time, student numbers increased dramatically, and there was a substantial deterioration in the staff-student ratio. However, as Hartley points out, the overall similarity in how we teach psychology in the 21st century compared to the 1960s is perhaps surprising. In what follows, however, I will be focusing on (and evaluating) some of the main changes that have occurred over the years.

Evaluation of changes

As might be anticipated, some of the changes that have occurred in the teaching of psychology over the past several decades have been beneficial and some have not. My evaluation of these changes is similar (but by no means identical) to that of Hartley. I will start with what I perceive to be changes for the better. First, there has been a steady increase in monitoring and evaluating the lecturing performance of lecturers. Indeed, until the 1990s there was essentially zero interest in monitoring lecturing performance! At Birkbeck, we had discussions about who was going to teach what, whether changes to the curriculum were needed, and so on. However, the crucial issue of whether our teaching was any good was ignored totally. In contrast, at Royal Holloway in the 1990s we developed an effective system of student feedback that fulfilled the useful function of allowing us to identify the very few lecturers whose teaching fell below a satisfactory level. The increased focus on teaching quality in most psychology departments in that era was perhaps the only beneficial effect of QAA. Bizarrely, in spite of its alleged emphasis on teaching quality, that contributed under 10 per cent towards the QAA's overall assessment of any department.

Second, technology has clearly had several desirable effects. In the 1960s and 1970s, I used to spend much of my time in lectures with my back to the students as I laboriously wrote in chalk on the black-

board. Nowadays any self-respecting lecturer has his/her set of Powerpoint slides that can be projected instantly onto a screen. There has also been a quiet revolution in students' access to journal articles. In the old days of 'dead-tree' publishing, articles could only be found in bound copies of journals. If one malevolent student decided to tear a crucial article out of a journal, no-one else had access to it. In contrast, most of today's students can access thousands of articles via *Web of Science*, and there is no competition for access to any given article. As Hartley notes, there is an increasing trend for the Powerpoint slides, lecture notes, and relevant journal articles to be available on the web.

Third, students nowadays are spared the ludicrous examinations that students at UCL were confronted by in the 1960s. I will content myself with a single example. Believe it or not, we sat a six-hour examination in which we had to carry out TWO entire experiments! Each experiment had to be designed, the stimulus materials prepared, participants run, the data analysed, and a complete write-up produced. Imagine students' reactions if anyone suggested bringing back such an examination!

What about changes that have made things worse? Hartley mentions students' assumption that only topics that have been explicitly taught should be examined. In my early days as Head of Department at Royal Holloway, a deputation of angry students came to see me with a complaint about one of the examinations. The gist of their complaint was that one of the topics that came up on the exam had only been the subject of half a lecture rather than a whole one! Contrast that with my experience as an undergraduate student at UCL in the early 1960s. The rule was that anything on the syllabus could be examined – the problem was that the syllabus covered almost everything including several topics not discussed in any lecture!

This enormous change in the relationship between what is taught and what is examined has had two severely deleterious effects. First, it means that recent graduates in psychology have a much narrower knowledge of psychology than was the case in the past. Second, this change is almost certainly the main reason why it is so much easier to obtain a 'good' Honours degree now than it used to be. To oversimplify a little, what has happened is that exams are marked as if they were unseen even though they are effectively seen.

My strong impression is that lecturers and students both adopt a more functional approach to higher education than was the case in the past. Norton et al. (2005) used the Approaches to Teaching Inventory, and found that lecturers showed more of a focus on knowledge transmission in their intentions than in their beliefs. This suggests that lecturers are responding to student wishes and expectations. Note, however, that concerns have been expressed about the validity of Approaches to Teaching Inventory (Meyer & Eley, 2006). Since student feedback on courses is publicly available and increasingly increases decisions that would-be students make about where to apply, there is little chance of any diminution of the functional approach anytime soon.

Another change for the worse was the substantial deterioration in the staff-student ratio around 1990. There was a very rapid shift from a ratio of about 8:1 to one of about 18:1 or worse. This change greatly constrained teaching possibilities, for example, by producing large increases in tutorial groups and/or a reduction in the number of tutorials. The recent decision by the Coalition Government to remove virtually all State funding from the teaching of psychology means that a further deterioration in the staff-student ratio is inevitable.

What about the future?

In the limited space available, I will focus on two changes in the teaching of psychology I would like to see. First, the ability to evaluate experiments critically is of fundamental importance in every area of psychology, especially given the intrinsic limitations of most research in psychology. However, it generally

does not receive sufficient attention in psychology degree courses. An American study by Weisberg et al. (2008) showed how deficient students' interpretations of research can be. They presented students at the start and at the end of a cognitive neuroscience course with a mixture of good and poor explanations for various phenomena. These explanations were sometimes accompanied by brain-imaging evidence that was totally irrelevant to the quality of the explanation. The key finding was that students were unduly impressed by explanations accompanied by neuroscience evidence, and the size of this effect was as great at the end of the course as at the beginning.

Second, most lecturers in psychology subscribe to the notion that it is very important for students to be able to evaluate theoretical approaches in psychology. Given that, it seems odd that most textbooks in psychology focus very largely on descriptive accounts of theory and research, with only limited attention paid to evaluative comments. With respect to my own textbooks, I decided over 20 years ago to conclude my coverage of each theoretical approach with an evaluation section. My hope for the future is that there will be a greater emphasis on evaluation in psychology textbooks and also perhaps in the Powerpoint slides used by lecturers.

Finally, there is one change that I fervently hope will not happen. There are several American universities in which student ratings of academic staff and personal comments about academic staff are accessible on the web. It will be time to throw away your mortar board and gown when comments about your colleagues such as, 'Professor X is an a**hole' can be read by the entire world.

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